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Locating Style: Style-shifting to Characterize Community at the Border of Washington, D.C.

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Abstract

While a number of sociolinguistic studies have examined intraspeaker variation and how it allows a speaker to negotiate identities related to class, much of the existing work on speakers and their physically-delimited communities has focused on interspeaker variation. The present study examines (th) and (dh)-stopping in two sociolinguistic interviews conducted as part of the Language and Communication in the District of Columbia (LCDC) project (Schilling and Podesva 2008). It examines topic-related style-shifting in two African American speakers, matched for age, from one neighborhood in the District of Columbia known for its high integration and cross-racial acceptance. As Washington, D.C. is a city whose rate of racial segregation is increasing (US Census 2010), I argue that these speakers use this ethnoracially-marked phonological variant in topic-based style shifting as a means of aligning with the race-neutral identity of the community of Takoma. Statistical results, supported by discourse analyses of the content of both speakers' talk, reveal that both speakers vary their rates of the stopped variant to contrast constructed dialogue of Takoma residents and non-Takoma residents and in talk about their relationships with their community in ways which reinforce the indexical links they make between themselves and the reification of Takoma as racially-neutral, integrated space. Many studies have shown that processes understood to be indexical of racial and class identities on an interspeaker level also function on an intraspeaker level (e.g. Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994). This study provides evidence that speakers' indexical relationships to their physical community can be studied at the level of the individual speaker as well.

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Jessica Grieser*

1 Introduction

Language practice is instantiated in community as a means for community members to show affiliation or distance (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, Bucholtz 1999, Labov 1966 and others). But what, exactly, do we mean by a “community?” We might understand community to be defined interpersonally based on shared social practice (Bucholtz 1999, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) geographically (Becker 2009, Johnstone and Kiesling 2008, Labov 1963, Labov 1966; Labov 1972a), but in all instances, linguistic practice is a means for community members to index themselves as members of that community.

Yet for most, the meaning of *community* comes from understandings of communities that are delimited by physical space; a neighborhood, a city, a school. Those who reside, do business, or otherwise inhabit that physical space become members of the community which that physical space defines. Tapping into the language practices of those who inhabit a physically bounded space can shed light on discourses that are meaningful to the members of that community, and also on the ways in which the community understands itself.

The present study examines topic-related style-shifting in two speakers from one neighborhood in the District of Columbia. I argue that these speakers use an ethnoracially-marked phonological variant (stopping of interdental fricative) as a means of both indexing racial identity for themselves and also of rejecting the construction of their community as racialized space.

2 Style-shifting as a Means of Expressing Community Identity

Many studies of language and place have looked rather extensively at groups of speakers, and the ways in which they collectively use linguistic variables to index ideologies of place and community membership. The most well-cited of these is Labov’s (1966) study of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and the linguistic features, particularly post-vocalic /r/ deletion, which index a lower east-side identity for the speakers there. This identity was found to be tied to other facets of group identity relevant to the lower east side community, such as race, class, and orientation toward other New York communities. Thus the indexical field (Eckert 2008) for post-vocalic /r/ deletion at the time of Labov’s study might encompass things such as “working class” and “blackness” as well as indexing residency in a particular locale.

These indexical links may shift, however, with the way the landscape itself changes over time. In her revisit to the Lower East Side, Becker (2009) explores the meaning of post-vocalic /r/ deletion forty years after Labov’s initial study. In the intervening years, the lower east side has become a heavily gentrified and trendy area, home to Greenwich Village and other highly-desirable communities in Manhattan. Becker posits that in the face of so much migration to the area, /r/ deletion has become a marker of an “authentic lower east side” identity which allows longtime residents to make a linguistic differentiation between themselves and the gentrifying newcomers to the neighborhood.

Studies of the speech of entire communities such as these provide a great deal of information about what kinds of variants are available for speakers to draw upon. Yet studies of many speakers within a community which explore macro-level connections between language practice and identities of place and race may overlook subtleties in the complex negotiation of situating oneself as a member of a particular community through one’s language practice (Podesva 2007, Schilling-Estes 2004). While interspeaker variation studies are useful tools to explain the ways ideologies and identities of place are negotiated, closer examinations of variation within the speech of individual speakers, known as intraspeaker variation, sheds light on the ways the practices ascribed to

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any given group function on an individual level. Speakers may vary their speech for many reasons: in order to indicate a stance (Du Bois 2007) taken toward an individual or concept, which has been argued to motivate variation at both the segmental (Podesva 2008) and suprasegmental (Nielsen 2009) level; in order to express distance from or solidarity with a real or imagined audience (Bell 1984, Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994, Hay, Jannedy, and Mendoza-Denton 1999); in order to create or reject indexical links between language and racial identity (Anderson 2008, Podesva 2008); or in order to embody a particular character type (Podesva 2007).

These multiple meanings which can be expressed through style shifting make intraspeaker variation a rich resource for understanding the kinds of links that speakers make between themselves as members of a particular place-based community—the connections which turn physical space into socially meaningful place (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Yet thus far relatively few studies have examined intraspeaker variation as a means of exploring how individuals may use style shifting to indicate ties to the locales in which they live and work. The current study, which examines topic-induced style shifting in the speech of two African American residents of the same neighborhood in Washington, D.C., is an exploration which intends to begin to fill this gap.

It is often the case that discourses of place evoke discourses of self, for as one negotiates oneself as a member of a particular community, one also identifies with or distances oneself from the character type which may be associated with that community. For example in Johnstone and Kiesling's (2008) work, to accept the identity of "Pittsburgher" is to also tie to higher-order indexical links which ascribe a particular character type, that of the white male steelworker, to the identity of "Pittsburgher." In Modan's (2007) exploration of the District of Columbia community Mount Pleasant, to embody the identity of a Mount Pleasant resident is also to take on an identity of urban, multiethnic cosmopolitanism. These sorts of place-to-character links make discourses of place an interesting site to explore the ways in which ideologies of race, class, urban/suburban, and the like become codified in a physical space. The present study examines one such physical space, the neighborhood of Takoma, D.C./Takoma Park, Maryland.

Takoma/Takoma Park (hereafter called Takoma) is a neighborhood directly on the border between Washington, D.C. and Montgomery and Prince George's counties, Maryland. Considered one of the wealthier neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., Takoma has a median household income of \$66,600 as of the 2010 census according to the Takoma Park Census and Community Information Website (TPCCI), approximately \$14,000 more than the national median. The neighborhood is also relatively ethnically balanced, with a population that is 49% white and 35% African American. It is also a highly educated community, with over 91% of its adults residents holding high school diplomas, and 53% holding bachelor's degrees or higher.

Its relative racial balance, as well as its situation at the border of suburban Maryland and urban Washington D.C. makes Takoma a site uniquely positioned for analysis of discourses about place and race in the Washington D.C. region. By examining the ways residents of Takoma talk about themselves and their community, we can find both discourse and phonological evidence that sheds light on speakers' ideologies of themselves and their community.

3 Method

The present study combines variationist sociolinguistic techniques with discourse analysis to unearth some of the ways in which members may situate themselves as racialized members of a supposedly race-neutral community. Below I will discuss briefly the variable under study, the informants, and the quantitative methods used to study this variable.

3.1 The Variable

This study explores phonological variation in a particular segment, the voiced and voiceless interdental fricative [ð] and [θ]. Fortition of these segments to [d] and [t] respectively is a known feature of African American English (AAE) (Fasold 1972, Labov 1972b, Rickford and Rickford 2000, Thomas 2007) and has been shown to be used in audience-directed and topic-based style-shifting (Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994, Grieser 2010). In addition, studies such as the one conducted among Cajun English speakers by DuBois and Horvath (1998) have tied the fortition of the inter-

dental fricative to both gender identity and community affiliation. In the present study, I use topic-based style-shifting to examine the ways in which this feature helps two speakers characterize their neighborhood as aracial space.

3.2 The Informants and Interviews

The data for this study come from two sociolinguistic interviews conducted as part of the Language and Communication in the District of Columbia (LCDC) project (Schilling and Podesva 2008), an ongoing project of the Georgetown University Department of Linguistics. Peter, the first informant, is a fifty-seven-year-old, African American resident and owner of a barbershop in the neighborhood.¹ A lifetime D.C. resident who has lived mainly in the neighborhoods surrounding Takoma, Peter owns two barbershops, one in the Takoma neighborhood and one in Anacostia, a neighborhood in Southeast D.C. Peter is a frequent user of a number of features of AAE at multiple linguistic levels.

Mona, the second informant, is a professional African American woman in her forties. She, too, is a lifelong resident of D.C., having grown up along the Sixteenth Street corridor, a main thoroughfare through Northwest D.C. which in recent years has become a place where a number of the city's wealthier black population has come to settle (Graham 1999, Robinson 2010). She holds a bachelor's degree from Howard and a law degree from George Washington. For these reasons, these two speakers provide an interesting means of exploring not only how people see themselves racially within a community but also how this may or may not mesh with identities related to social class.

3.3 The Quantitative Method

In order to hone in on the function of the variable as it relates to topic-based style shifting, tokens of the interdental fricative were coded for phonological and lexical factors as well as discourse factors which might affect the realization of the variable. The linguistic factors coded were preceding and following phonological environment, lexical category of the word (functional vs. lexical) and position of the interdental fricative (word-initial, word-medial, word-final). Discourse factors coded were the sex of the speaker and topic (the focus of this study).

The interviews were coded exhaustively for tokens of the interdental fricative within the topics of Takoma, of the DC/Maryland community more broadly; race talk (as defined by Myers and Williamson (2001)); and talk about language. The first pass coded the tokens impressionistically, and the impressionistic coding was checked by examining spectrographic image of approximately 10% of the stopped tokens in PRAAT. Tokens were coded for all non-standard realizations: [Ø d t f v]; only the [d t] realizations were analyzed. Instances where the presence or absence of an interdental fricative were ambiguous, such as sentences like "We are part of [ə] community" (Peter), where [ə] could be either the indefinite article or a null realization of the interdental fricative on a definite article, were excluded from the analysis. In addition, realizations where a final token was followed by a glide [j] were excluded; such instances often resulted in palatalization of the final segment resulting in the affricate [tʃ] and making it difficult to determine the precise realization of the fricative. In total, 506 tokens were coded from the Mona interview and 852 tokens were coded from the Peter interview, for a total of 1358 tokens.

Statistical analysis of the factors under consideration was performed using multivariate regression in Rbrul.

4 Data and Results

All data were coded for four linguistic factors: preceding phonological environment, following phonological environment, lexical category of the word, and position of the interdental fricative; and two discourse factors: sex and topic (age of the speakers and community of speakers were

¹This study was conducted by two interviewers of two different races, and as such, has been the subject of further study on addressee-induced style shift by the author (Grieser 2010).

controlled for in speaker selection). All factors, linguistic and discourse, were found to be significant predictors of stopped realization of the interdental fricative in a binomial step-up and step-down regression. Below I consider each linguistic factor in turn, and finally turn to the social factors of speaker and topic that are of particular interest to this study.

4.1 Linguistic Factors

Tokens were coded for precise preceding and following phonological environment and examined for similarities in behavior across any identifiable natural classes. Based on this, the preceding environment was collapsed into four categories: vowels, coronal consonants, non-coronal consonants, and pause; following environment was collapsed into three categories: vowels, consonants, and pause. Both preceding ($p = 0.029$) and following ($p = 0.027$) environments were found to be significant predictors of stopped variants. For preceding environment, vowels were found to have the strongest effect, followed by coronals, pauses and consonants; for following environment, consonants were found to have a more significant effect.

In addition to phonological environment, the position of the interdental fricative (word-initial, word-medial, word-final) was found to be a significant predictor of stopped realization ($p = 0.033$). Finally, lexical category was found to be a significant predictor ($p < 0.0001$), with functional words being much more likely to be stopped than lexical words.

Table 4.1.1 lists the linguistic factors found to affect the realization of the interdental fricative, in descending order of effect as determined by factor weight.

	factor	tokens	% stopped	factor weight
lexical category				
	functional	1014	0.246	0.666
	lexical	344	0.015	0.143
preceding segment				
	vowels	387	0.191	0.964
	coronals	502	0.239	0.953
	pause	112	0.214	0.94
	consonants	356	0.157	0.933
following segment				
	consonants	124	0.185	0.995
	vowels	1227	0.205	0.986
position				
	initial	1171	0.219	0.693
	final	55	0.273	0.616
	medial	132	0.023	0.217

Table 4.1.1 Linguistic factor effects.

4.2 Social Factors

Studies have shown that usage patterns of features of AAE vary across differing social classes (Labov 1972c, Rickford and Rickford 2000, Rahman 2008). Thus it is unsurprising that Mona and Peter, who differ substantially in social class and the social circles which they inhabit, exhibit quite different rates of th/dh fortition. Peter's stopped realization rate is nearly twice that of Mona's, as shown in table 4.2.1.

	fricated		stopped		total N
	N	%	N	%	
Mona	444	87.75	62	12.25	506
Peter	640	75.12	212	24.88	852
Total	1084	79.82	274	20.18	1358

Table 4.2.1 Total N and % Realization by speaker.

Thus far, most studies of AAE have privileged the working-class male speaker (Peter in this analysis) as being the speaker of the most “authentic” AAE. Yet the U.S. black population continues to grow more socioeconomically diverse (Robinson 2010), and thus it is important to think about the ways in which black speakers who do not fall into this traditionally-analyzed group of authentic vernacular speakers use features of AAE. To do this, it is necessary to look at more localized usages of AAE features, and the roles they play in creating social meaning for those who use them.

We see exactly this sort of localized variation in Mona's speech. Although on the whole, Mona uses the stopped variant just over 12% of the time, in one stretch of race talk encompassing 18 tokens, she uses a stopped variant six times and a null variant once, accounting for more than 33% of her total tokens in this stretch of speech, almost three times her overall rate for the interview. In her talk about gentrification and whites moving into Takoma for instance, the stopped variant is used quite frequently:

- (1) When I grew up there[d]
- (2) it was predominantly an African-American community,
- (3) Mhm.
- (4) and now, white families are starting to move into the[d] community.
- (5) As well as Latino families,
- (6) and-just-
- (7) when I was growing up
- (8) it wasn't that[d] ... white families couldn't live there[d]
- (9) because it was just
- (10) “Oh we don't talk to them[d] white
- (11) But it was just- they[ð] just didn't . Yeah.
- (12) Um, and-77 so they[d] started ... um ... close to the[ð] Metro station,
- (13) and then[ð] just kind of branched ... further[ð] out
- (14) and ...
- (15) They[ð] were accepted ,
- (16) but it was just when I went to- to high school at Coolidge ...
- (17) I don't think[θ] I had any white in my graduating class.

By using an AAE variant to talk about white migration into black space, Mona is able to linguistically situate herself as an original and authentic member of the community like those in Becker's (2009) study, as well as to reclaim and reify the space as “black space” through the use of black-associated speech.

Not only does Mona's patterning exist at the level of topic, but her style shifts across even smaller stretches of talk within a broader topic. If we examine lines (11) through (13), for instance, we see that of six instances of the interdental fricative, all but one are realized fully fricated. This is in contrast to the rest of this stretch of speech, where all but one realization are stopped. Why is this? Looking more carefully at the content of these three lines, Mona is speaking specifically about the integration of Takoma, as white residents “started close to the Metro station” and “then ... branched further out.” Thus we see the same pattern rarified on an even smaller level: as talk moves from the beginning of the neighborhood's integration to the point that white members are accepted, so Mona's speech moves away from a variant associated with African American speech, effectively “integrating” her speech along with the neighborhood she describes.

Peter similarly exhibits a style-shifting pattern that reflects his identity in relationship to the physical communities of which he is a part. In describing the heavily-segregated neighborhood of

Southeast, Peter, although a user of the stopped variant at almost twice Mona's rate, makes very sharp distinctions in his use of the variant in constructed dialogue (Tannen 2007) for himself and for characters he portrays as being either hapless or very successful. In part of the interview, Peter tells a very animated story about the panhandler approaching him and providing a very close estimate of his day's earnings, and expresses his own puzzlement as to how the panhandler managed to come up with the figure he quotes. His realizations of the interdental fricative variable play a significant role in his construction of the differences between himself and the panhandler. Consider the following (realizations of the variable are marked in parentheses):

- (1) He had came down
- (2) and asked me for two dollars
- (3) and I asked him I said wait a minute
- (4) because I know he expecting me to come off real crazy whuhhh
- (5) I said let me get this([d]) straight
- (6) You want me to give you two dollars
- (7) You want me to reach into my pocket and the([ð]) money that([ð]) I stood there([d])
all day long and cut hair with
- (8) take my money and give it to you
- (9) so you can go back up into the(Ø) woods
- (10) ad smoke some crack (on) the([ð]) milk crate
- (11) and drink beer with the([d]) money that([ð]) I made all day
- (12) Is that([ð]) what you asking?
- (13) Is that([ð]) what you said because I'm not understanding
- (14) (4 lines omitted)
- (15) How he'd know how much money I got?
- (16) I'ma standing here watching everyone's come in here
- (17) because its certain ones of them(Ø) around here
- (18) they([d]) ain't going to get in nobody's chair but your chair
- (19) especially them([d]) gals
- (20) they([d]) come down there(Ø) for the(Ø) eyebrow arch
- (21) and they(Ø) don't mess with([d]) the([d]) rest of them(Ø)
- (22) I know they(Ø) came to you.

In this stretch of narrative, Peter positions himself as the hard worker in contrast to the panhandler's laziness; consider lines 6-11, where Peter describes the way he has acquired "the money that I stood there all day long and cut hair with" in contrast to what he supposes the panhandler will do with it: "so you can go back up into the woods and smoke some crack on the milk crate". He shows this difference through his descriptions of the panhandler, but he also uses the variables in the speech itself as part of his positioning.

In Peter's constructed dialogue for himself, in lines 4-13, he uses the interdental fricative ten times. Of these ten, only four are stopped (40%). By contrast, in his constructed dialogue for the panhandler (lines 16-22), all eleven instances of the interdental fricative are realized with the stopped or null variant. Because more standard realizations of a variable are commonly conflated with higher levels of education and higher status, Peter uses standard realizations of the interdental fricative in his own constructed speech as a way of reinforcing the distance between himself and the panhandler, and to paint himself as the educated hard-worker, which is congruent with his description of the panhandler's laziness in contrast to his own industrial work in the shop.

These sorts of close discourse analyses reveal the stopped variant to be doing a great deal of work for both speakers in constructing their ideologies of place and in constructing racialized, socioeconomically-stratified characters. In order to better quantify what was going on within the interviews, all 1358 tokens of dh/th were coded exhaustively for topic. This coding followed the same "bottom-up" approach often used in coding phonetic factors: the topics were first coded for a highly utterance-specific topic such as "cat" or "dog" or "vet" and then these things collapsed into larger categories such as "pets." This ultimately resulted in topics grouped into four categories: talk about language and language practice (language), talk about Takoma as a community (Takoma), talk about other communities in D.C. and Maryland (DCother) and talk about race (race), in

order to test the hypothesis that speakers might use th/dh to contrast Takoma with other neighborhoods. When all four topics were included in the statistical model, topic emerged as a statistically suggestive, but not significant, predictor of stopped realization ($p < 0.08$). However, it seems evident from the micro-level analyses presented above that topic is salient for the speakers; their speech patterns according to what and whom they speak about. This evidence justified the running of a second regression model, this time collapsing all community talk into one category, and all race talk into another. On this run, topic emerged as a statistically significant predictor of the stopped variant ($p = 0.024$).

factor	tokens	% stopped	factor weight
race	109	0.294	0.592
language	34	0.118	0.49
other	1215	0.196	0.418

Table 4.2.2 Topic Effect on Realization.

5 Discussion

Given that it is evident that the speakers do use a variant as a means of displaying place identity, both across topics and even within shorter stretches of talk about their neighborhoods, we might question why it is that place fails to emerge as a statistically significant predictor of style shifts in this model. One explanation may come from the way race is codified in D.C. space. The two most recent censuses show increased migration of upper-class whites into the western quadrants of D.C., with increasing poverty and growing minority racial populations in the other two quadrants. Thus D.C. neighborhoods are often inherently racialized entities—to talk about the heavily-black Southeast neighborhood of Anacostia is to talk about blackness, to talk about the predominately white neighborhoods in the upper Northwest is to talk about whiteness. Thus in the same way talk of language often cannot be separated from larger Discourses about race (Podesva 2008), to talk about D.C. as physical space is similarly to implicitly talk about race.

Additionally, the lack of statistically significant difference between Takoma talk and non-Takoma talk, particularly in light of the content of Mona's interview, may point to the speakers' identities and stances toward Takoma vs. D.C. more broadly. Takoma, to its residents, is consistently referred to as race-neutral—the idea is that the community is first and racial divides are not salient for its members. The lack of distinction between Takoma-oriented talk and non-Takoma-oriented talk may be best interpreted as a reflection of this general valuing of race neutrality and multiracial acceptance that is dominant throughout the Takoma community.

6 Conclusions

Variationist analyses provide insight into a community's macro- and micro-level language practice. They give us information about salient separations in discourse for particular speakers. Yet it is also important to situate variationist study within locally salient discourses of identity, which often are tied to place.

We have long understood that phonological variables may codify local, place-oriented identities (Labov 1963). In the small study of Mona and Peter, their use of the variable in question is revealing with regard to its use to index racial identity. Talk about the District of Columbia occasions different use of the variable than does talk about race. Yet within talk about the District of Columbia, there is not a difference in the use of an ethn racially-marked variant between talk about Takoma and talk about D.C. more broadly. I suggest that this is a sign that for these speakers, Takoma is to be interpreted as racially neutral space.

Further work is needed to examine whether or not this lack of distinction between District of Columbia talk and Takoma talk exists for more Takoma residents. In addition, while the rates of use of the variable support the hypothesis of a continuum in black speech styles which is related to

social class, this is a very small sample of only two speakers, who, although contrasting on an area (class) in which this study is interested, do not provide so much evidence that generalizations can be made much beyond their own style. A greater number of informants across a variety of socioeconomic classes and careers would provide additional insight.

In his interview, Peter comments, “Doesn’t make a difference whether I’m black you white or what nationality you are. We’ve gotten past that you know....Doesn’t make a difference whether it’s D.C. or Maryland, bang! We are a part of a community.” It is this attitude which characterizes Takoma as a haven of race-neutral unity. Because to talk about D.C. is to talk about race, to balance Takoma talk with talk about other parts of D.C. is to implicitly reject race as a salient discourse of Takoma—it positions Takoma as exactly the race-neutral space that its residents take pride in.

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